

## Freedom of expression ... and its impact on the public

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The Danish Daily that caused so much turmoil internationally has finally offered a full page apology in a pan-Arab newspaper last week.

However, reportedly, it stopped short of explicitly saying sorry for printing the cartoons of Prophet Muhammad.

Such an attitude is not a new phenomenon.

Author Gai Eaton cited in his book, *Islam and the Destiny of Man* (1985), that this has been the case for at least 800 years when the Prophet was labelled as "the Anti-Christ".

This has reminded on the European consciousness till today, observed Cambridge-educated Eaton, who embraced Islam in 1951 before joining the British Diplomatic Service. He currently act as a consultant to the Islamic Culture Centre in London.

"Indeed, ever since the seventh century when Islam emerged as a force in Europe, all the resources of language were pressed into service of a propaganda campaign which might have brought a blush to the cheeks of the late Dr Joseph Goebbels," wrote Eaton.

We recently, a number of US tele-evangelists continued the same practice using similar hateful language and abusive descriptions.

The reality is that there will always be someone who will continue to promote the type of "propaganda campaign" alluded to by Eaton.

The European media is no exception, given the fact that the continent is still noted for some of the worse massacres in modern history. More-over, it is also in that part of the world that images of Jesus Christ suffer humiliations in the form of the demeaning cartoons and vulgar caricatures.

So should it surprise us when a number of European dailies see it fit, in a show of solidarity, to do the same to personalities of other religion, this time, Islam? To understand this is enable us to deal with the situation in a more constructive way in accordance to the teaching of Islam.

For a start, the Quran has instructed the Prophet not to reciprocate wicked speech: "Nor are the good deeds and the evil deeds equal. Repel evil with what is better, then will he between whom and thee was hatred, become, as it were thy friend and intimate". (XLI:34).

Admittedly, the Prophet of Islam is too magnanimous to be troubled by a mere cartoonist's handiwork based on a narrow viewpoint. He has gone through far worst.

On another occasion: "Tell my servants to say what is the best. For Satan sows dissension among them; verily Satan is to man an evident enemy." (XVII:53).

According to Mohammad Hashim Kamali, in his book *Freedom of Expression in Islam* (1994), these passages ask believers to speak fairly, even if they are addressing their foes or manifest transgressors of God's law; and too speak courteously to others, according to standards of discourse. Better still to turn potential hatred into friendship.

More significantly as noted by Kamali, God has granted no one, not even the Prophet, absolute freedom of speech. Rather the Prophet is given specific guidance as to the way to communicate – through good advice and courteous methods of persuasion.

Yet this seems to be a point of departure in the current controversy ignited by the callous attitude shown by some of the European media leaders.

For reason entirely understandable in terms of European history, freedom of expression, including artistic ones, is now cherished as sacred principles of western culture, observed Eaton.

Hence, like the Danish newspaper, the Danish Prime Minister, in an earlier statement, said that he could not apologies for the publication of the controversial drawing.

He was quoted as saying: "Of course the principle freedom of expression is the most important principle for us.

This is our priority number one.”

In this respect, Eaton elaborates: “Islam was never subjected to an Inquisition or to the severe constraints imposed on freedom of expression by the Catholic Church until recently.

“Muslims, therefore, do not understand the intensity of the emotions aroused on this issue. At the same time, western cultured cannot accommodate the Muslim belief that the word is act; to speak or to write (or draw, as in this case) is an act comparable to all the other actions which the undertake every day of our lives”.

In other word, the said drawing could be deemed as an act of “violence” in itself, no different from the widespread outrage witnessed all over the world. While some may reject this perspective and insist the resentment could not justify violence, the reality is what we see happening the world over, causing unnecessary chaos and even death.

In other words, the “violence” incited by the publication of the insulting caricatures (which actually started as a series of 12 cartoons in the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten in September could have been avoided, if only the “violent” act of drawing, copying and reproducing it was curbed very much earlier.

Is this not what “globalization” entails, predicated on respect for the values held by others – even though it is something that one could barely comprehend?

Unfortunately, on the contrary, there are those who insist that it is at the core of their culture that all thing be freely subjected to not just criticism, but rendering them in objects of ridicule and profanity. They seem not to cars what impact it has on the public at large, as long as freedom is left unbridled.

Ironically, as argued by Eaton, too often we fail to realize that in whatever society we may live, our actions are constrained in the public interest.

More specifically, in Europe and America of late, these constraints have multiplied rapidly. This is especially so in the US, in fact, even more so after 9/11.

So it is reasonable to ask how it is that one can accept this vast and oppressive network of laws and regulations while, at the same time, removing all constraints from one the most potent forms of action: the spoken or written word.

On this matter, perhaps it is worthwhile contemplating what fellow journalist Andreas Smith, an ex-editor of The Independent (Britain), had to say recently: “Newspapers should indeed expose self-censorship where they find it, through they should remember they are often guilty themselves in relation to the interest of their owners.” But, isn’t this a world of hypocrisy and double standards?

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